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AUTHOR Cumming, Alister
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ABSTRACT

An approach to language program administration attempted to integrate three factors: communicative syllabus use, in-service faculty development, and collective decision-making on techniques for implementing instruction with specific student groups. The approach was devised for a university program of non-credit intensive academic English courses. The students in the program were a heterogeneous group with a wide variety of characteristics and needs, and the syllabus was undeveloped. The procedure involved teachers' identifying specific student learning problems from classroom behavior, circulating the information to colleagues for comments and instructional strategy suggestions, and discussing the problems in regular meetings. After an initial six-month period, an informal consensus regarding teachers' perceptions of student problems was reached, and a wide variety of relevant teaching techniques or behaviors for classroom interaction had been implemented. Faculty in a similar program at another university also reviewed the information, and the results closely approached the original faculty group's ideas. This approach to faculty development has the advantages of integrating professional growth into the administrative decision-making process and of being managed by the program staff itself. (MSE)

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Compiling Instructors' Perceptions of Learners' Deficiencies:

A Problem-centered Approach to In-service Training and Language Program Development

Alister Cumming

Centre for Applied Language Studies
Carleton University

An increasingly signifigant body of material is being written in three areas of Language Education which have not hitherto (or to any great degree) been directly associated. First, an accumulating momentum has been generated behind the movement for communicative syllabuses in language programs to be negotiated between instructors and applied linguists who take into account their students' specific learning and communication needs (Brumfit 1983, Johnson 1982, Yalden 1983). There are also appeals by teacher trainers who advocate continuing in-service development for teachers of languages as a means of ensuring that teachers master their professional capacities in the classroom management of learning (Bosquet and Mackay 1979, Brumfit and Rossner 1982, King 1983, Mohan 1982). Yet another set of writings recognizes the need for practicing teachers and administrators to resolve collectively the problems they perceive to exist within their teaching environments (Calve 1983, Early and Bolitho

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1981, Johns 1981, Munsell 1982). Considered together these issues represent various aspects of a concern for what Brumfit (1982) calls the 'humanistic' elements which may contribute to the effectiveness of a successful language program.[1] Surprisingly little has been said, however, about specific procedures which administrators of language programs can implement to actively promote these elements as goals of development for language programs.

Situation

This paper documents an approach to program administration which attempted to integrate the three factors of, 1) communicative syllabus specification, 2) in-service professional development of teaching staff, and 3) collective decision-making on the techniques for implementing instruction with particular student groups. The approach was devised for a program of non-credit intensive courses in academic English at Carleton University in 1983, where a number of (undoubtably common) complexities inherent in the program called for a more efficacious system of staff and program development than is normally afforded by the conventional formats of weekly discussions, informal contacts, or demonstrations of teaching techniques. A sudden increase in the population of students from contract groups created circumstances wherein several relatively inexperienced teachers were hired to work alongside a core of more experienced teachers. The learner groups consisted of extremely heterogenous types and ages of individuals with varied cultural backgrounds as well as various purposes for studying the language. In addition, time had not permitted the full specification of an appropriate syl-

[1] Brumfit (1982) cites language programs: "where staff-student contact takes place over a long period so that participants have time to build up a genuine relationship", "where teachers perform their tasks efficiently but with a constant regard for the feelings and variable needs of students", "where staff are confident of the abilities of students to succeed", "where the students are confident that the staff understand exactly what they are doing", and "where the staff visibly respect each other and work together as a team".

labus for study. An expedient procedure for program development was required in order to cohere staff into a working team that agreed on the manner and content of instruction, to allow newly hired teachers to profit from the experiences and perceptions of the core staff (while also encouraging the formers' individual development into competent instructors), and to provide a teaching environment which recognized particular students' needs for language learning.

Procedure

The procedure implemented involved each teacher identifying 'problems' which they considered the students demonstrated in their learning behaviour during classes (see Appendix A). Descriptions of these deficiencies were circulated every second week for other staff to comment on and to suggest 'remedial' teaching strategies for (see Appendix B). This material then formed the basis for more extensive discussion of learners' needs, appropriate teaching techniques, and sharing of research reports or reference materials at bi-weekly staff meetings structured as problem-solving sessions. Minutes of these discussions were taken, distributed to staff, and reviewed at following meetings. After a six-month period of implementing this technique, an informal consensus regarding teachers' perceptions of many of the so-called deficiencies demonstrated by the learners had been reached and a wide variety of relevant teaching techniques or behaviours for classroom interaction had been implemented. Attempts were then made to analyze the signifigance of the evolving documentation.

Correlation with Another Program

The accumulated number of thirty odd 'problems' were compiled into a list of seventeen items (see Appendix C) which represented the set of items contributed by various staff members during their discussions about learners' specific deficiencies; many overlapping or common items were

Figure 1

Rank ordering of items by arithmetic mean.

Items are identified by letters corresponding to the sequence of items shown in Appendix C.

	Carleton Ranking N=10	U.B.C. Ranking N=7	Mean Ranking
1.	p (3.8)	g (4)	d (4.2)
2.	p (4)	d (4.4)	g (4.2)
3.	g (4.4)	p (4.8)	p (4.3)
4.	h (4.8)	i (5)	h (6.6)
5.	c (6.2)	a (6.4)	a (6.7)
6.	a (7)	c (7.2)	c (6.7)
7.	o (7)	h (8.4)	o (7.9)
8.	l (8)	j (8.6)	i (8.1)
9.	e (9.6)	f (8.8)	f (9.2)
10.	f (9.6)	o (8.8)	b (9.5)
11.	b (9.8)	b (9.2)	e (9.9)
12.	i (11.2)	e (10.2)	l (9.9)
13.	j (11.6)	l (11.8)	j (10.1)
14.	m (12.6)	q (12)	q (12.8)
15.	q (13.6)	n (13.4)	m (13.8)
16.	k (13.8)	k (14.4)	n (14.1)
17.	n (14.8)	m (15)	k (14.1)

compressed into one and some extraneous items were eliminated. Instructors in the program at Carleton were asked

to rank order the items in terms of their perceived importance. To establish external verification of the pertinence of the rankings, instructors in a similar but longer established ESL program at the University of British Columbia also rank-ordered the same items. A cross-comparison of the means showed a high level of correlation (.8 using the Spearman Rank Order Formula) to exist between the ratings by the two bodies of teaching staff, including a certain degree of consensus on the instructors' perceptions of the relative importance of the items identified. Analysis of the rankings showed both groups of teachers to be most concerned about learners' deficiencies which related broadly to the concept of 'language learning strategies'[2]:

- students lack self confidence
- students have difficulty applying known information
- students have problems learning new language items from context.

Other items were categorized more specifically into groups relating to the probable causes of learners' perceived problems—inadequate strategies for coping with classroom instruction (items a, e, f, j, k, q, in Appendix C), inadequate comprehension strategies (items h, l, o), a general lack of skill in English or university study (items b, c, m), or problems caused by the administration of the language program (items i, n)—however no consensus over the priorities attributed to these latter categories emerged from the data.

Relation to Syllabus

While no steps have been taken to relate these percep-

[2] The three items ranked highest correspond loosely to three of Stern's (1975) "ten features that mark out good language learning": "a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language and empathy with its speakers", "an active approach to the learning task", and "strategies of experimentation and planning with the object of developing the new language into an ordered system".

tions formally to the design of courses, this act could represent a further stage in the process of program development. As preliminary gestures in this direction, several instructors have produced possible outlines for course components of the intensive program. Many of the less experienced instructors showed a marked shift (over the eight month period described) toward preferences for course types with a content and interactional emphasis rather than an emphasis on language items or the 'four skills' (i.e. reading, writing, listening, speaking) which had previously made up the program design. Concluding that the procedures for 'problem-solving' were responsible for these shifts in orientations in teaching would be presumptuous, especially when concerns for students' self-confidence, abilities to apply known information, and facilities for learning language from specific contexts are all representative of developments that have taken place throughout the methodology of language teaching in general. Nevertheless, it can be said that the 'problem-solving' procedures did focus the attention of teachers firmly on the task of perceiving and analyzing the learning needs of their students, with the implicit assumption that such perceptions relate directly to their decisions about approaches to, or strategies for, language instruction.

In-service Training

The approach to in-service training described here assumes that such training is instituted in order to develop a language program as well as to match its design to the learning needs of its students and participants. Unlike the conception that in-service training should cater to the aspirations of developing teachers who wish to obtain a recognized form of certification (cf. Lange 1983), this approach assumes the process of teacher development can be subsumed within the greater priority of administering an effective system of language education for language learners. But rather than say-

ing that in-service training needs are necessarily secondary, we ought to look for ways which promote the professional development of teaching staff concurrently with the development of a consensus by all staff members on how language teaching can be most successfully implemented with specific learner groups.

Professional Development

To describe where or how in-service training took place in the program documented here is much the same thing as describing how decisions were made regarding the design of the program itself. At staff meetings teachers contributed their perceptions of problems which they had observed learners experience during their classes. Inevitably, less qualified instructors contributed 'problem' items of a less signifigant order ('students cannot follow instructions for exercises' or 'students resist accepting the conventions of formal English') than those of their more experienced colleagues. The latter's resources of techniques for coping with such difficulties of classroom management were drawn upon to provide a wealth of advice for those teachers who were especially in need of in-service training. Moreover, after several weeks of serious discussion of this type, so-called trainees were able to note the type of 'problems' which the more experienced teachers concerned themselves with. As a consequence, the order of their perceptions about learners' deficiencies increased considerably so that virtually all staff were not only openly identifying major issues ('students lack self-confidence' or 'students have problems learning new language items from context') which appeared to hinder the progress of learner groups but also were supplying practical recommendations about teaching strategies which might counter these difficulties. This 'group dynamic' then quite naturally led itself toward sensible definitions of the types of study which would be suited for the learners in the language program.

A Similar Approach

Directed in this manner, the effect of identifying problems in a language program took on quite a different character from that reported by Early and Bolitho (1982) who addressed an in-service training session of secondary school teachers in Bremen with a similar problem-solving technique but found that the teachers were more preoccupied with "objective constraints implicit in the school situation": "a. wide ability range in classes, b. teacher effort being out of proportion to student response, c. lack of time to 'cover' the syllabus, d. material conditions in classrooms, e. class size (classes of thirty-plus pupils), and f. inadequate textbooks and materials." A major difference between the two approaches, however, resides in Early and Bolitho's undertaking of their project as a five-day course offered by consultants from outside of the program itself. This appears to have resulted in their receiving an inevitable expression of frustration about working conditions (over which staff had little control), whereas the procedures employed at Carleton were staged as an on-going process of discussion amongst program staff who were able to utilize the technique both as a vehicle for contributing their perceptions and solutions to one another regularly and as a means for sensing that their contributions were being incorporated into the 'organic' development of the program's design.

Discussion

Contrasting these two efforts at implementing problem-solving techniques with language teaching staff again exposes the importance of so-called 'humanistic' concerns in language program development (cf. Brumfit 1982, cited earlier). While the act of teaching is in itself perhaps the best form of in-service training available, there remains a need for developing teachers to engage themselves purposefully in the decision-making processes which lead to the establish-

ment of a language program that satisfies the expectations of learners and teachers alike. By sharing perceptions about students' deficiencies in learning behaviour, ideas on appropriate teaching strategies, and articles on research or materials design, developing teachers can learn to recognize the issues with which they should properly concern themselves when performing their duties, to accomodate their beliefs or attitudes to suit a group consensus within a relatively short period of time, and to apply themselves toward the vital task of developing a language program which meets their learners' goals.

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APPENDIX A

A Sample of the Form Distributed to Elicit Teachers' Identification of Learners' Deficiencies

Originator:

Contributors:

Students in class _____ appear to have problems _____

_____

This is most evident when:

1.

2.

3.

Suggested teaching strategies or procedures are:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

APPENDIX B

Sample of a Completed Form Distributed amongst Teaching Staff at Carleton University

originator: Alister

contributors: Renata, Lonny, Roger, Razika, Anne

Students in class ___D___ appear to have problems formulating answers to comprehension questions in their own words and without copying inappropriate material from the source document they are working on.

This is most evident when:

1. students are writing answers to questions from taped material
2. questions ask students to interpret rather than directly quote material
3. students do not appear to have considered the logical implications of what they have written

Suggested teaching strategies or procedures are:

1. Write down students' answers as a list. Have the class analyze them to see if they offer appropriate formulations. This often has good results with less complex exercises.
2. Try showing examples of different responses to the same material. Grade them according to level of appropriacy, from simple restatement to more interpretive views.
3. Have students analyze a series of possible answers to questions about a passage - from verbatim statements to interpretations with totally different rephrasings. Discuss the potentially different meanings in each answer.

4. Ask students to compare their responses and reach a consensus on which answers provide the most appropriate responses. Ask them to explain why some answers may include inappropriate material.
5. Encourage students to formulate their own questions about passages so that their level of questioning matches their level of comprehension.

APPENDIX C

Items Ranked by Teachers

a. students become confused by unknown vocabulary items
b. students confuse registers of English
c. students have difficulties identifying the forms (speech parts) of words
d. students lack self-confidence
e. students do not make full use of homework assignments
f. students do not pay attention to instructions given by teachers
g. students have difficulties applying known information
h. students are distracted by particular features of texts and thus fail to grasp the overall meanings of passages
i. differences in proficiency levels within classes cause more proficient students to become bored and less proficient students to become confused
j. students often fail to perform to their full potential in group activities
k. students tend to plagiarize from source documents
l. students tend to interpret English literally and not derive inferred or suggested meanings from spoken or written texts
m. students often lack adequate library research skills
n. students feel disoriented if they are relocated in different classes after a change of terms
o. students have difficulties recognizing the referents of words (especially pronouns)
p. students have problems learning new language items from context
q. students resist accepting the conventions of formal English